Declassified and Approved For Release 2011/12/19 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000706090031-9

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A12

NEW YORK TIMES
19 June 1986

U.S. Reported to Pursue Indictment of Israeli Colonel in Spy Case

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 18 — The Justice Department has decided to seek the indictment of a prominent Israeli Air Force officer who has been linked to an Israeli spy ring, a knowledgeable Reagan Administration official said today.

"We're headed toward indictment," the official said, denying reports that the Administration was seriously considering granting immunity to the Israeli officer, Col. Aviem Sella. "It is our intention to indict."

The official, who has detailed knowledge of the case and who spoke on condition that he not be identified, indicated that the decision to seek criminal charges would be revoked only if certain important conditions are met.

Outlook on Cooperation

Asked what circumstances these might be, the official suggested that Colonel Sella might agree to name any other Israelis or Americans involved.

Colonel Sella has already been named by the Justice Department as a conspirator in an Israeli espionage operation that oversaw the activities of Jonathan Jay Pollard, a former American naval analyst who has pleaded guilty to espionage. Senior Administration officials have said that Mr. Pollard has since provided information implicating other Israelis.

In Jerusalem, a senior Israeli official expressed great disappointment at the prospect of the indictment of Colonel Sella, who is frequently described as a future leader of the Israeli military and is now commander of Israel's Rimon air base.

In an extended interview, the Reagan Administration official scoffed at the suggestion that the United States might readily agree to provide Colonel Sella with immunity. "It's baloney," he said.

Extraordinary Public Debate

His comments are part of a remarkable, largely public debate between the State Department and Justice Department, and the governments of the United States and Israel, over how to handle a case that has severely embarrassed the Peres Government.

The interagency dispute involves law-enforcement agents and other Administration officials who want to press forward with prosecution, and State Department diplomats who fear the effect of the case on American-Israeli relations.

In his remarks today, the Administration official seemed to want to bring additional pressure on Israel to cooperate in the investigation. It could not be determined to what degree the statements today were a maneuver designed to strengthen the negotiating position of those pressing for indictments or increased cooperation from the Israelis.

Spokesmen from the State Department and Justice Department had no comment on the developments today.

Justice Department officials have said they are still seriously considering charges against other Israelis for their involvement with Mr. Pollard, who sold American military secrets to Israel in exchange for tens of thousands of dollars.

Issue of Israelis' Immunity

Decisions on whether to seek the indictments would depend, they say, on the department's ability to revoke immunity granted to the Israelis in interviews conducted last year.

Law-enforcement officials have said that the promises of immunity can be abandoned if, as they believe, Israelis clearly lied in the interviews. Colonel Sella, the officials say, has not been interviewed by American prosecutors.

According to Administration officials, the Israelis who were interviewed last year failed to mention Colonel Sella's name when questioned about members of the espionage operation. The Americans said they learned of the the colonel's involvement only after their conversations with the Israelis.

Earlier this month the Justice Department filed court documents reporting that Colonel Sella put Mr. Pollard in contact with Israeli espionage officials and served as his first "handler."

Israeli Pressure Reported

One knowledgeable American official said Israelis were providing "no cooperation whatsoever" in the investigation and that the Israeli government was instead attempting to end the case by bringing political pressure on the United States.

According to the official, Israel is reportedly planning to send a high-level emissary to the United States to ask that the inquiry be brought to a close without additional strains on American-Israeli relations.

But the official indicated that the effort would have little effect. Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d and other senior Justice Department officials have already made the decision to pursue the case "no matter where it leads," the official said. "The decision was made a long time ago."

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